



Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America

Linda Lawrence Hunt

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In 1896, a Norwegian immigrant and mother of eight children named Helga Estby was behind on taxes and the mortgage when she learned that a mysterious sponsor would pay \$10,000 to a woman who walked across America.

Hoping to win the wager and save her family's farm, Helga and her teenaged daughter Clara, armed with little more than a compass, red-pepper spray, a revolver, and Clara's curling iron, set out on foot from Eastern Washington. Their route would pass through 14 states, but they were not allowed to carry more than five dollars each. As they visited Indian reservations, Western boomtowns, remote ranches and local civic leaders, they confronted snowstorms, hunger, thieves and mountain lions with equal aplomb.

Their treacherous and inspirational journey to New York challenged contemporary notions of femininity and captured the public imagination. But their trip had such devastating consequences that the Estby women's achievement was blanketed in silence until, nearly a century later, Linda Lawrence Hunt encountered their extraordinary story.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America Details

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From Reader Review Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America for online ebook

Heidi says

This woman was so boss. In this book Linda Hunt recounts the forgotten story of Helga Estby's walk across America. While much of the actual historical record of the trip has been lost, Hunt gives a compelling portrait of ordinary life in America in the late 1800s. In fact I found the window into the time period in some ways more interesting than the actual details of Helga Estby's journey, which had to be scraped together from newspaper articles. I thought it was interesting read, especially since I'm from Spokane area.

Kate Lawrence says

What an amazing true account of courage and persistence! I'm glad Helga Estby's story is finally being told. The book is appealing, with fairly short chapters, numerous photos from the time period, and plenty of opportunities to reflect on the ways our country is both different and the same as it was in 1896. A major difference, and one frequently encountered, is society's attitudes toward women. Example 1: when Helga wears a "reform" style dress (mid-calf instead of ankle-length skirt, over leggings or boots), many people are shocked at her "immodesty". Example 2: on the cross-country walk she visits the home of William Jennings Bryan, who was running for President that year. Bryan's wife Mary had studied law but "she never dreamed of practicing it." Instead, she saw it as a way to help her husband.

Another difference is helplessness in the face of serious infectious disease, specifically in Helga's life, diphtheria. Many families saw their children fall ill and could do nothing to save them.

Regarding similarities between then and now, most noticeable was income inequality and the suffering of the poor. Helga experiences this herself and sees it in many people she meets as she walks.

The book ends with an additional chapter on how we tell--or don't tell--family stories. Overall, the book gives readers a fascinating story while offering much to ponder.

Leslie says

Amazing book, amazing feat! (and feet)

This woman walked from Washington State to NYC in the late 1800s with her teenage daughter - WALKED!.

Many times there were no roads, and no towns to stop in.

They were allowed to have only five dollars in cash each.

They had to shoot at men who bothered them.

And in the end...

Nah, read it. It's good!

Randy says

Here's a book that would make a great film. A farm family in Eastern Washington is facing foreclosure. A

mysterious patron offers Helga Estby, our heroine, the opportunity to win \$10,000 (about \$200,000 in today's dollars) if she can walk from Spokane to Manhattan collecting signatures from mayors along the route and modeling a new reform costume, an outfit that exposes the ankles. Helga and her 18 year old daughter Cora set out, armed with revolvers and pepper spray, following the railroad tracks across the West, through the Mid-west and onto New York. It's 1896 and the country is still in the throes of economic chaos following the panic of 1893. There is a heated Presidential campaign in progress featuring the laid back Wm. McKinley and the young firebrand William Jennings Bryan who rails against America's Wall Street masters. Helga, a Norwegian immigrant, who has birthed nine babies, and Cora walk twenty-five miles a day stopping in towns to offer interviews with the local papers and selling portraits of themselves to raise cash for the venture. Most of the documentation of this historic walk has been destroyed for reasons that evolve out of the story. Ms. Hunt has done a masterful job of historiography in bringing this amazing adventure to light and, at the same time, painting a picture of the United States in 1896.

Jody says

I didn't want this book to end. I was deeply enthralled with this story about Helga's life - a seemingly ordinary life yet extraordinary because she challenged the Victorian limitations that even women themselves embraced. This is a book about how families "silence" a story. Helga's story was silenced within her family and, yes, even by Helga herself. Her grandchildren did not even know what small miracle she accomplished. Helga's autobiography that she had painstakingly, secretly written in her later years was found after her death by her daughters and subsequently burned - their resentment and anger still simmering after all those years that Helga left her home and family to traverse this country on foot. I felt somewhat frustrated that Clara's, the daughter who accompanied her, story is not told. What happened to her and why didn't she protect her piece of family history. This book will make you think about your own family history and what mysteries lay undiscovered. This book will make you appreciate the opportunities women have today because of women like Helga Estby.

Caroline says

In 1896 Helga Estby, a Norwegian immigrant living in Spokane, Washington, and her daughter Clara set out to walk across America. They were attempting to win a wager of \$10,000 put up by a wealthy New York sponsor, who was aiming to demonstrate that women were not the weak and feeble creatures that society believed them to be. They were not allowed to beg for rides or lifts, and they had to work for their food and clothing in towns along the way. Helga left behind her husband and seven children in Spokane, in an attempt to win the \$10,000 and save their farm from being foreclosed.

This is an extraordinary read, all the more so for having been buried for nearly a century. Helga's family were so angry and resentful at what they felt was her abandonment and her more than year-long absence that they never talked about her remarkable achievement. Her papers were burned by her daughters after her death, and it was only the chance discovery of some newspaper clippings by a daughter-in-law that the story was remembered at all.

There is a lot of speculation in this book - Hunt had to rely largely on newspaper accounts to fill in the story, as nothing Helga herself wrote has survived, and so there is a lot of 'filling in the cracks' in this book. She delves quite deeply at the start into the lives of Norwegian immigrants and the pioneer settlers, a subject

which is interesting enough in its own right. Helga went through some truly trying experiences, conceiving a child out of wedlock, being a pioneer wife in a sod house on the prairie, suffering a serious accident, undertaking innovative surgery to restore her health, and finally taking on such an immensely dangerous and risky adventure. She comes across as a truly remarkable woman, courageous, daring, confident, self-sufficient, and it's a crying shame that her story has been silenced until now.

Skye says

I read this whole book in one day on a long flight to San Francisco... And was so glad I did! It is a must-read for everyone, but especially those interested in feminism and American history. The story seems almost to crazy to be true, and it was an absolute page turner!! I will be recommending this to all my friends. The only reason why it doesn't have 5 stars is because there were some sloppy grammar mistakes that drove me nuts, but it was always on a punctuation level so it only slightly distracted from the story. As a historian, Hunt couldn't be more careful and fair in her portrayal of this story. I think this would be a really compelling read for high school students, too!

Monique says

The fascinating true story of a woman and her daughter who walked by themselves from Spokane, WA to New York City in 1896 in hopes of winning a cash prize and saving their farm from foreclosure. The author does an excellent job in chronicling their odyssey and describing for modern readers the intense social, ethnic and familial forces that coalesced and lead to the silencing of Helga Estby's story within her family for several generations. As I read about the Estby family's financial struggles and the heart-wrenching details of the horrible economic situation the country was going through I could not help but reflect that there's nothing new under the sun! In that sense it was an inspirational story to me because Helga definitely took matters into her own hands and went against the ethnic, societal and religious norms of Victorian times in order to do so. For this daring, she was severely punished by her family --some of whom went so far as try and erase her story after she died.

Book reads like a well-written term paper. I enjoyed it very much.

Danielle says

I was intrigued by the title and synopsis of this book. As it turned out, it was my own little endurance journey to finish it, but the interesting bits made the high-school-history-report style of the writing tolerable. This was an interesting story, I just wish there was a better version of it. Hunt repeatedly emphasized (in a preface, an introduction, a forward, and an epilogue, I believe) the great tragedy that was the intentional "forgetting" of Helga Estby's cross-country walk by her embarrassed family. Estby actually wrote her own book about her experience (never published) which her family destroyed after her death. Okay, no doubt that is unfortunate, but Hunt seems not to consider the possibility that Estby was anything other than a hero. She blames the family's lack of pride in their matron's accomplishments on Victorian-era stigmas regarding women and their role in society. But, I think it's more likely that Estby was selfish, and a little too keen on

the idea of getting something for nothing (she sued the city of Portland when she fell off the sidewalk, with language grieving her pain and suffering that would make the most unscrupulous personal injury lawyer proud). Also, she pretty much did straight up abandon her family, so while her walk is impressive, and her various encounters are interesting to read about, I don't think this is the one-sided story Hunt portrays.

Agneata says

I found this book at the last moment in the fiction section of the used book store. It is not fiction rather, a story the family of Helga attempted to silence and forget. They almost succeeded. To win money to save the family farm, Helga and her daughter walked unescorted across America in 1896.

Much was lost though when Helga's children burned all her papers, including the story of her and her daughter's walk across America. The author, Linda Hunt, researched and was able to bring Helga's story to book form. You have the feeling that something fantastic was lost though in not being able to know the full story.

I did not care for the analyzing and almost preaching tone in the last chapter. Overall though, having very little to work with she did a great job of telling Helga's story.

Sarah says

This is an AMAZING story that was almost completely lost! Helga and her daughter WALK across the United States in 1896 in order to win \$10,000 to pay their mortgage and save their farm. The fact that she left 7 children at home (the youngest was 2yrs) with her husband (recovering from injury) shows how desperate she was to save the farm, but also what an independent courageous woman she was. Stepping out of the cultural norms of acceptable female behavior at the time put her in the midst of some of the most well known political and social upheavals our country has seen.

The story of the walk is amazing. What makes this book unforgettable is the fact that the story was almost lost because of Helga's family's reaction to her trek. Reading this book will make you think about stories in your own family. It will make you wonder if there are missing stories that need to be told. It will give you a greater appreciation for how each person's story adds to our collective history and how important it is to share the easy and painful stories. This book made me appreciate my own personal history and the personal histories that make up my country.

SmartBitches says

Full review at Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

In 1896, Helga Estby went for a walk with her seventeen-year-old daughter, Clara. They started off from Spokane, Washington, and ended up in New York City. The story of that walk is the topic of the nonfiction book, *Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America*.

Hunt's book is wonderfully written, managing to make Helga's life and the trip come to life despite not

having much in the way of hard facts to go on. The writing is conversational. Hunt writes with a warm tone, as though she and Helga were friends. Hunt also manages to convey a great deal of emotion and interest without constantly falling back on “She must have thought...” speculation. She also does a good job of explaining why the rest of the family resented the walk so much.

I don't want to spoil what happens entirely, but it's not a story in which everyone triumphs. Helga's family refused to ever speak of the trip and after Helga died, her children burned her notes and memoirs. While most modern readers will see Helga's walk as laudable, her family viewed it as shameful, partly because of tragedies that took place at home while she was away.

I actually found the events before and after the walk to be the most interesting, possibly because they were the most detailed. At various points, Helga lived in a dugout, fought a fire, moved to the city, and sued the city for an injury she sustained while falling on a broken curb. After the walk, Helga became an artist and a suffragette. The walk itself could be a bit monotonous, although the chapter in which they get lost is terrifying. I was amused that of all the items they could possibly bring, one of the very few things they carried for 3000 miles was Clara's curling iron. It came in handy when they met Native Americans, who found it fascinating.

I had so many feelings about this story, and so many questions. I wanted to know more about Clara, for one thing. Who was Clara's father? The identity of the sponsor remains a mystery. Why was the prize money offer so sketchy? Sometimes I felt anxious, sometimes I felt triumphant, and frankly at some points the book is just horribly depressing.

But above all, I have one hopeful thought about this book: may we all have people in our lives like Helga's daughter-in-law and grandchildren who insist on telling our stories.

- Carrie S.

Kari says

I had forgotten how much of this biography is deeply sad, this poor family! But what guts this woman had, especially considering the restraints on women at the time. Also I am noticing this time around how strangely similar our current political/economic problems are to the period the book takes place in, ie bank failure, repossessions, the 'worst of times' kind of speeches from political candidates. In a way its comforting to know that everything that's happening now happened then, and somehow people came through it.

Pamela says

In 1896, a mother and daughter accomplished the seemingly impossible, walking from Spokane, Washington to New York City in just under seven months. They didn't do it for mere folly. It wasn't a women's suffragette ploy. Or a protest. It wasn't some new health craze. (Heaven forbid, Victorian era women were considered far too frail for strenuous exercise). Nor was it an attempt at fame and fortune - though a good deal of money was on the line.

Helga Estby, Norwegian immigrant and mother of eight, signed a contractual wager then left the younger

children in her husband's care (against his advice and without his blessing) and headed out with her teenage daughter, Clara, across America's vast and wild expanses in hopes of saving their family farm. The proposed payoff: \$10,000. That's about \$200,000, by publication date standards.

Across mountain ranges, lava wastelands, and tall-grass prairies - home to all sorts of predatory animals, reptiles, ruffians, and hobos - they hiked; fording rivers and streams, tumbling over boulders, fending off predators, suffering the elements. It was no easy feat. Walking 27 miles per day on average, without modern day conveniences, earning travel funds along the way as stipulated, was quite the undertaking. The hardiest of men would have had a rough go of it. More than once their revolvers were brandished.

Plus, another element that one must consider, it was quite scandalous for women to leave hearth and home, travel unescorted, like vagabonds, traipsing across the wild frontier. Not to mention, doing with shockingly exposed ankles! As part of the wager, they had to wear the "reform" skirt - aka bicycle skirt - that featured a hemline rise of six to eight inches off the ground.

Fascinating! I wonder what Victorian America would think of today's fashions????

Really and truly, the entire story is fascinating. Their accomplishment, though darkened by tragedy, is absolutely amazing, and commendable. I'm delighted to have learned about Helga's life, Norwegian culture, the social/economical/political tones of the era, and of course - the wagered journey. It's really a shame their story isn't more widely known. And for that, there are many reasons, which the author makes special note of - repeatedly. Yes, there is a good bit of redundancy. And many incidents of side note story fill. Partly because much of Helga's story has been lost to time; silenced purposely; forgotten selectively; overlooked and unappreciated from stigmas of the era.

A solid good read for International Women's History Month. Absolutely a story worth recounting and remembering. Pleasantly readable. And there are many wonderful, era-enriching photographs. Drawbacks: repetition and some dry story fill.

Nearly four-stars, but not quite. The value of Helga's story, however, is immeasurably priceless.

THREE *** Fascinating and Historically Relevant *** STARS

Terri Ehrlich says

I really wanted to give this book 4.5 stars, but that option is not possible. I rounded up to counter someone else who will give it 4 for the same reason. This story is fascinating on so many levels. I live in Spokane, so there is the local interest. But the main draw is the issue of societal expectations of women and the consequences for those who dare go beyond the norm. Women in history are often disregarded, and their experiences and contributions are ignored, often to the detriment of future generations. Add to that the resentment of a family, and it's a wonder any shred of the tale existed. Helga's walk so went against the beliefs of her contemporaries that the story was almost entirely lost. The loss of history is a tragedy, and this tale is no exception. I was so enthralled that I read the book in two sittings!
